

# Beyond Crisis: College in Prison through the Abolition Undercommons

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Our aim in this *Lateral* thread is to consider opportunities for new ways to engage abolition in relation to college in prison programs.

This thread explores inter-relationships among institutions of higher education and prisons. We focus in particular on teaching and learning – the hallmarks of college in prison programs – as they relate to research and administration within and across universities/colleges and prisons. Our aim is to contribute to broader structural thinking about how we can work in college in prison programs most ethically and in ways that contribute to prison abolition within and across campus and prison settings.

We draw inspiration from Harney and Moten's *The University and the Undercommons (Seven Theses)* (2004). In this thread we provide not just critique (although we do that) but also meditations on possible alignments with fugitive enlightenment and the abolition undercommons, even though neither contemporary college in prison programs nor critical carceral studies scholarship demonstrate or exemplify this commitment in any automatic way.

This piece is organized in six short sections that readers can access in any order:

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Each section is meant to be free-standing, yet also networked. This organization is meant to disrupt knowledge acquisition as it accrues within the specific logics and vocabularies of individual institutions. We thought this was the best way to reflect how meaning-making participates in the vernaculars of specific institutions while also translating and code-switching across them.

# What is at Stake?

Across the United States increasing numbers of universities and colleges, primarily restrictive enrollment public and private institutions, are offering post secondary educational programs for students currently locked inside prisons. A much smaller group of universities and colleges are building pipelines to provide access to post secondary education for students who were previously inside prisons (see for example John Jay College of Criminal Justice Prison-to-College Pipeline (<http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/projects/nys-prison-to-college-pipeline/>)). The backdrop for these initiatives includes public narratives about a “crisis” in both higher education and prison systems in the United States. Escalating tuition rates, unchecked student debt, diminishing status for degrees, short-term skill training replacing long-term human development, the disappearance of the full time tenure track faculty member – all are invoked to demonstrate the crisis in higher education. Wide-spread hunger strikes in California and Georgia prisons in 2012 and 2013, legislators increasingly reluctant to allocate shrinking state revenues toward corrections, mainstream media coverage of inhumane conditions including overcrowding, racial segregation, inadequate mental health care, and sexual assault – these are invoked to demonstrate the crisis in prisons. The purpose and promise of higher education degrees and of our prison nation are both allegedly in crisis, yet educational programs inside prisons draw increased attention.

As faculty members invested in prison abolition in different states and disciplinary locations, we have participated in developing and implementing programs related to “college in prison.” (See definitions of abolition and prison industrial complex (<http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/>)). Yet we are often dissatisfied and at times dismayed by the prevailing frameworks used to rationalize and navigate this work. Generally, public rationales for college in prison programs affirm: a) that higher education teaches human values and workplace skills; and b) that prisons warehouse people who have not yet accessed these values and skills. According to this rationale, universities/colleges providing incarcerated people with access to these values and skills serve the public good by increasing post-release access to secure employment and social rehabilitation and decreasing rates of recidivism and threats to public safety. This framework affirms the allegedly waning value of higher education as a response to the allegedly waning value of prisons: college in prison programs transform prison institutional spaces, criticized for their disciplinary and violent modes of dehumanization, into spaces of higher education offering *ethical and aesthetic values, socially sanctioned humanization, and cognitive or intellectual uplift/reform*. They provide improved conditions inside prisons and improved preparation for life after release from prisons, a combination of increasing interest to private foundations and philanthropists also involved in the restructuring of higher education (<http://education.msu.edu/irtl/pdf/Trends%20in%20National%20Foundation%20Funding%20for%20Education%202013.pdf>).

College in Prison programs also increase the value of higher education for those studying and working on main campuses. Universities/colleges provide value-added for students matriculated on the main campus when they create opportunities to visit or learn alongside incarcerated students. The educational goods provided reinforce the value accrued to higher education when it interfaces with prison systems: it offers a “humanizing” and educational encounter between people of presumably different life experiences (akin to diversity-based service learning or study abroad programs) and/or it increases skill-sets or provides “field” experiences for those seeking employment in fields such as criminology or social work (akin to unpaid internships or research assistantships). For teachers and administrators employed on University or college campuses, prison-based education is increasingly popular as service or volunteerism. Yet teachers in these programs are often disconnected from program design and administration, despite the fact their reason for

teaching inside may be motivated by commitments to prison abolition or social justice. In addition, incarcerated participants in these programs may only be involved as students, and their families/communities of origin may have no relationship to the educational program, inside or outside the prison.

The framework outlined above does offer many opportunities for abolitionist engagement. For students who participate in college in prison programs, there are potential abolitionist outcomes not dissimilar to any learning context: leadership development, skill acquisition, intellectual community, collective mobilization, intellectual autonomy, etc. For teachers who participate in college in prison programs, there are also potential outcomes that facilitate abolitionist politicization: crossing the walls separating incarcerated from “free world” populations, redistributing resources and benefits for which college personnel are “gatekeepers,” and displacing the college campus as the center of intellectual, cultural and social capital while reinventing the public function of higher education institutions as meaningful sites of learning. Yet for staff and administrators of these programs, there are more mixed political opportunities. The Department of Corrections constrains and shapes the official program goals and controls who has access to the classes; funder expectations must be met or assuaged; the sponsoring university or college may want to frame and narrate the program through their lens (often a charitable form of public service); and the list goes on. While we recognize the value of abolitionist outcomes for individual participants, we are also interested in how an abolitionist lens can re-map the current “crisis” in post secondary education *and* prisons and create potential sites of collective engagement, organizing, and analysis. Moving beyond individualized aims, we are interested in making different structural connections amongst these institutions and exploring how the re-emergence of higher education programs inside prisons participates in changing institutional relationships.

Coming from queer, feminist, anti-racist and economic justice backgrounds, we have both been struck by the hetero-gendered, economic and racial dynamics of volunteerism in most U.S. prison education programs. This phenomena has certainly been noted in other arenas of non-profit development and the governmentalization of social justice efforts. As the *Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (2009) volume has summarized, the NGOization of radical politics not only reduced the practical and imaginative goals of social justice organizing, it also reduced the population perceived as legitimate professionals capable (and available) to lead this work. The rise in white middle-class “ladies bountiful” certainly echoes earlier historical moments of domestic and moral uplift, and the specific economic and political reforms understood as “neoliberalism” have substantively shifted the significance and techniques through which such white ladies have and share bounty. White supremacy, rigid gender policing, and compulsory heteronormativity within prisons (and in Universities) function as effective filters to regulate who can imagine working with these programs, and who can feasibly negotiate the bureaucratic and structural hoops to gain admittance. Anecdotal evidence confirms that volunteers undergo differential treatment on the basis of race and gender, particularly during interactions with the officers who control entrance into or movement within the prison. Volunteers teaching in prison education programs extend the work of the University for low or no cost (han).

We use Fred Moten and Steven Harney’s “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses” (2004) to help us understand the problems that arise when colleges and universities become more actively involved in providing access to higher education for people currently inside prisons, rather than for those living on the outside before or after incarceration. The Abolition Undercommons framework allows us to bring together questions of labor and justice across institutional spaces. To be clear: both authors are committed to providing access to higher education for people who are currently incarcerated. The abolition outcomes listed above justify this practice on structural grounds, but beyond that both *Lateral* authors feel education should be available to all. Individuals deserve quality education with no strings attached, and individuals who are currently incarcerated are no exception. That this is not the case in our society today is part of the problem we face

here, and the “Abolition Undercommons” provides one vocabulary through which to consider how higher education programs inside prisons successfully address one part of the problem and how they might more successfully develop partnerships to address others.

## Abolition Undercommons Language

It is hard to engage Moten and Harney’s “The University and the Undercommons” without seeming to fall into the trap of “professionalization” they lament. In their “Seven Theses,” they point out that professional academic writing often privileges “critique” as its mode of engagement. Academic writers strike poses of critical detachment to further an argument, often summoning the ghost of Kant even as they depart from Kantian judgment to insist upon a radical critique of humanism tout court. They call this posturing “Enlightenment-type critique.” According to Moten and Harney, this type of critique participates in deadening intellectual labor that is easily expropriated to the University. This is the problem of “professionalization”: it takes intellectual engagement and transforms it into protocols of critique that reinforce the political, economic, social and cultural systems of the University. The rise of “critical university studies,” which has tried to direct scholarly attention to the problems of the political, economic, social and cultural systems of the University, ends up paradoxically reinforcing the system it critiques. People employed by the University use critique to distance themselves from the University, publishing professional scholarship that in turn bolsters the legitimacy of the University by making good on its “negligence (han),” making its negligence back into its profit, its surplus, its value-added. As Moten and Harney put it, “Would it not mean that to be critical of the university would make one the professional par excellence, more negligent than any other? To distance oneself professionally through critique, is this not the most active consent to privatize the social individual?”

Moten and Harney do not make an argument but instead offer Seven Theses, in keeping with genres of more contrapuntal meditation. Ultimately they favor what they call a “fugitive enlightenment” that denies and takes back the terms of enlightenment critique. What “negligent” professional scholars see as “a passionate example full of prophecy not proof, a bad example of a weak argument making no attempt to defend itself, given over to some kind of sacrifice of the professional community emanating from the Undercommons” is rather another mode of address. Another mode of address, but not entirely. Another mode that returns to that which defined it as an other, one that loves “the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons.” In place of anti-humanism as critique (which the undercommons do not recognize, yet “know it is not love”), Moten and Harney call for something that remains un-named but which goes by the many names of enlightenment and its fugitives.

The first problem in responding to Moten and Harney’s call comes at the moment one sits down to write an essay for an academic journal. Professional academic prose requires subject-verb agreement and specific protocols of reasoning. The copula and its rationalities are both restrictive and necessary if one wants to persuade people within one discourse community—the academy—about the necessity of listening to and engaging with another—here people involved in higher education programs inside prisons, who may or may not be “academics” depending on how that term is defined. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that these “groups” may not share the same languages or reference systems even within their shared discourse, or may overlap institutionally and yet have different relationships to institutional discourses and spaces depending on their audiences at any given moment. Here we engage “abolition undercommons” as it is offered by Moten and Harney, as a call and a practice articulated in the vocabularies of the professional humanities (and some

social sciences) as well as of fugitive enlightenments. That some vocabularies of the professional humanities are also those of the fugitive enlightenment is of great interest here, as is the fact that members of the undercommons may not necessarily speak or use that language as it is expressed in their piece.

Our own response to the problem of “professionalization” is to mix the languages used across the spaces and modes of labor related to higher education programs inside prisons. This includes a blend of administrative, logical, and political rhetorics alongside various vernaculars produced by our experiences working within higher education programs in prison, institutions of higher education outside prison, and activist networks exposing and seeking to transform the connections between the prison and the University/college as institutions. These vernaculars include reference to efficiency and outcomes, academic disciplines, and the discourses surrounding the prison nation. We do this because the risk of “professional” publication on higher education programs inside prison is similar to those outlined at the outset of this section: higher education programs inside prisons supplement the failing University, offset its negligence specifically in the realm of alleged “criminality,” and displace criminality into service absorbed as value by the University. Publishing critique of this phenomena threatens to exacerbate the general problem of professional university critique. We don’t think this is a simple problem, and it does not have a simple solution. In our contribution to this *Lateral* thread we seek to explore how precisely higher education programs in prison relate to University conditions, as well as how writing about those programs rather than merely serving within them might both fit into and disrupt schemas of University professionalization.

## Abolition Undercommons Labor

Moten and Harney cull the concept of the “abolition undercommons” from their account of the University and its relation to negligence or criminality (han). First, the “undercommons” describes a particular relation to the University’s organization of labor. The University accumulates the value produced by alienated labor, even as the division of labor and value operates through divisions between the pedagogical, administrative, “intellectual,” custodial, on so on. The labor performed by the upper echelon administrators is differentiated from that of the comprador class of tenure-line faculty, which is differentiated from that of the surplus army of adjuncts and teaching assistants, which is in turn is differentiated from that of the “working classes” of custodial and service providers, which in turn is differentiated from the flexible and fungible labor of people producing technology, textiles, and physical plant materials in the global South or U.S. prisons. Critiques of the “new University” (aka the corporate, neoliberal, or global university) often focus primary on the denigration of intellectual labor and the re-valorization of administrative labor.

Some critiques, including anti-sweatshop or divestment campaigns, move beyond the status-wars between administrators, tenure-line faculty, and contingent teachers and focus on the range of labor required to maintain the current university. Confusion over who precisely provides intellectual labor, how it is formalized and what genres of intellectual labor are recognized impacts whether adjunct and graduate student labor form a distinct class in the university’s class structure. These critiques open the geography of the University to a broader map of inter-relationships, allowing us to see how “labor” and “research” are defined through international political economy writ large. This is where Moten and Harney locate the “undercommons” of the University: “Maroon communities of composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers.” These people do not fit into the professionalization paradigms of specific disciplines, departments, or university spaces. They can be summoned in the names of Enlightenment categories; they are of the University’s divisions of labor, value, and humanity but not fully circumscribed by it.

Second, “abolition” describes the prophetic wish that commitment to the undercommons will abolish the condition in which academic professionalism becomes a political mode of negligence. Commitment to the undercommons leaves behind professionalism, including the professional embrace of critical education. The University is not to be salvaged in the name of the “masses” who might still enter its doors as students. It must encounter those people who inhabit the university as its unrecognized labor already, including them in the intellectual work of undoing “ethics and efficiency, responsibility and science, and numerous other choices, all built upon the theft, the conquest, the negligence of the outcast mass intellectuality of the Undercommons.” This appears as passion more than critique. Teaching is not an activity that can exceed the institutional frameworks of its own professionalization, its own inhabitation of specific classrooms, specific disciplines, specific departments. But teaching can induce something like the abolition undercommons to enter academic space: “it is not teaching then that holds this social capacity, but something that produces the not visible other side of teaching, a thinking through the skin of teaching toward a collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project, and a commitment to what we want to call the prophetic organization.”

They conclude that a commitment to the abolition undercommons departs from traditional left approaches to the university. “The slogan on the Left, then, universities, not jails, marks a choice that may not be possible. In other words, perhaps more universities promote more jails. Perhaps it is necessary finally to see that the university contains incarceration as the product of its negligence.” Organizing within the “schools not jails” framework is then misaligned, potentially reproducing networked institutions to capture more bodies. In place of this framework, they remind us: “perhaps there is another relation between the University and the Prison—beyond simple opposition or family resemblance—that the Undercommons reserves as the object and inhabitation of another abolitionism.” The Undercommons reserves this other relation, this relation thought otherwise, as that through which another abolitionism can emerge. Moten and Harney do not fill in the content of this other relation between University and Prison, and documenting this other relation in tables and charts risks the professionalized capture they continually warn against. Disclosing this other relationship is not a professional project but a process of committing to the Undercommons as the method of constituting the practice of another abolition.

Moten and Harney suggest that a commitment to the “abolition undercommons” reveals a complex relationship between the University and the Prison. Neither parallel nor opposed institutions, the University and the Prison are interconnected through the political, economic, social and cultural systems that divide and distribute labor, value and humanity. Such a grand, Enlightenment statement hides within it the additional truth, that various public and private two- and four-year universities and colleges, as well as various jails, detention centers, parole offices, state and federal prisons, and police stations, are interconnected through the political, economic, social and cultural systems that divide and distribute labor, value and humanity. The geography of these institutions is complex and uneven. One person could earn a “free” degree from a private four-year University while locked in a state prison and accumulating debt for legal services, another could incur high-interest student loan debt from attending a public or private four-year University, another could be enrolled in an on-line for profit University with a steep tuition price and student debt without matriculating on a campus, and another could be enrolled, inside prison or after release, in a public community college in a free or low cost non-degree granting employment training program. The distribution of value and humanity does not work within and across institutions as one might expect when a capitalized definite article is placed in front of “University” and “Prison.”

Moten and Harney do not address the institutional spaces in which universities and prisons intersect explicitly: pipeline programs seeking to create tracks to college for people considered “at risk” of entering the juvenile and/or adult carceral system; programs creating access to college courses and college credits for people who are currently incarcerated; and programs creating opportunities for post-release students to start or complete degrees. These programs create institutional relays between universities and prisons, although they are not often elevated to the philosophical priority of impacting relations between “The University” and “The Prison.” Our Lateral thread focuses on these institutional relays and asks if and how they participate in an “abolition undercommons.” We understand along with Moten and Harney the aim of commitment to an abolition undercommons as “not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.” Thinking with Moten and Harney allows us to ask: are college in prison programs part of the abolition undercommons? What is role of “professionalization” within and through these programs? What is the role of publishing “critique” about these programs? Or about Universities and Prisons from the vantage point of working within these programs? What are the limits or dangers of passion and humanistic love revealed by these programs?

## Universities in Crisis

The university is in crisis. Or so we are told with regularity across media and political sources from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to the White House. The declaration that the U.S. system of higher education is in crisis comes with a specific recitation of evidence. The evidence begins by focusing on the experience of students. First, the cost of higher education has been rising, while free or low-interest financial support for earning a college degree has flat-lined or decreased. Earning an undergraduate degree frequently requires amassing debt. According to the National Education Association (<http://educationvotes.nea.org/2013/07/02/degrees-not-debt-student-loan-debt-infographics/>), the average debt for an undergraduate degree is approximately \$26,000. Most public state universities run on tuition dollars rather than state contributions, and recent years have seen states raise tuition caps to offset dwindling public support. Second, a college degree does not necessarily lead to employment in a middle class sector or, increasingly, employment at all. Restructured labor markets and “jobless” economic recoveries decrease access to moderate-wage jobs after completing college, resulting in a generation of college graduates with high debt and little hope of paying it off.

Additional evidence is drawn from institutional and educational administration. The third focus is on the top-heavy economic structure of universities, exemplified by a widening income gap between top-level administration, mid-level tenure-line faculty, and the lowest-wage earners on campus. University economics are bolstered by the suppressed wage labor of students on campus who run academic departments, libraries, residences, food services and more, and ongoing struggles to unionize custodial or teaching labor are met with administrative resistance. Fourth, this economic model measures the university’s teaching and learning core by how well it operates as an efficient and cost-effective educational delivery system. As a result, the overwhelming majority of college and University classes are taught increasingly by flexible labor pools – contingent workers, post-doctorates, grad students, and as yet unidentified limited term labor classifications. Nationally, the New Faculty Majority (<http://www.newfacultymajority.info/equity/>) reports that less than 25% of all post-secondary classes are taught by tenure-stream faculty, those with guaranteed benefits and contract security in employment. Fifth and finally, this economic structure is reflected in a more market-driven governance structure, with higher education cultures shaped less by faculty senates,

unions or even politicians than by student loan companies, multinational food service corporations (such as Sodexo), military and big pharmaceutical research dollars, real estate developers and so on - resulting in a form of *antidevelopment*.

Most of the evidence above locates “crisis” in the changing economic structure of the four year university. Yet while state support for four year universities diminishes or is stagnant, many states are prioritizing job training and professional certification programs at community colleges, technical training institutes, or two year institutions. The “crisis” in the university is more accurately described as a transformation in the values associated with higher education, including a decreasing public stake in humanistic or arts education and increasing investment in job readiness and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields across two and four year educational attainment levels. The economic narrative of this transformation as “crisis” tends to foreground the experiences of historically white and middle-class college populations. The economic crisis narrative tends to obscure the historical relationship of poor and lower-income students seeking resources from the two and four year university and the “outcomes” promised for participating in costly access to higher education credentials. For many poor and lower-income people, access to a liberal arts education, often via a four year college or university, has always been a “crisis.”

The current focus on the “crisis” in student debt is one example of eliding what is at stake in the transformation of disabling debt and dispossession, now distributed more evenly to the former middle class. For poor people, the PELL grant has never covered the full cost of post secondary education, and access to a four year liberal arts degree that is not linked to an employment track has always been a challenge. The four year college experience has always been predicated on the experiences and life pathways of people from middle-class or affluent backgrounds, in which parents can provide ample financial support, students can take unpaid internships and study abroad programs, students are not raising children themselves or supporting family members, etc. The same might be said for the “new” interest in the role of temporary and flexible workers enabling institutional function. While the decrease in tenure stream lines is a relatively contemporary economic turn in post secondary education, the university has always been a site of the exploitation of rigidly racialized and gendered labor: custodial, food service, secretarial, etc. The focus on intellectual laborers in teaching and laboratory research is not always connected to the unionization struggles of administrative and custodial staff at the same institutions. Once again, the university is defined by its research/teaching functions rather than its institutional function as a whole.

The humanities and liberal arts are central to our understanding of either crisis or transformation. The humanities face new challenges in defining and justifying its role within the larger system of higher education. Humanities faculty and students face diminishing funding and perceived relevance in ways that cut across two and four year institutions unevenly. Humanities-based academics often respond to these problems by: a) reminding people of the value of intangible learning outcomes related to the “soul” or ethical potential of the human being; b) reminding people of the value of aesthetic judgment to the human being; c) valorizing ethical or aesthetic learning for the new global economy by focusing on adaptability and creativity as values of the knowledge economy (understood to be the middle-class domain of the U.S.); and/or d) valorizing the skill-sets of oral and written culturally competent (“multicultural”) communication for the new “diverse” global economy. The first two responses seek to translate the value of traditional humanistic fields to publics who do not understand their value, focusing on how we need to remain interested in the “human” as a crucial category of pleasure and experience. This is translated into a pedagogical mission extending the domain of humanistic research to “public humanities” aimed on a variety of publics perceived to be relevant, almost always middle-class/middle-brow to elite publics. These discourses are always framed as



race-neutral, yet often replicate racial exclusions or exhibit racial tokenism. Partnerships with major arts institutions or with community-based cultural institutions are often sought to expand the domain of humanistic research relevance.

Addressing the first two areas prioritizes humanities “research” and seeks to remind publics who have political and/or economic capital via voting and donations that humanities role at four year universities is still a priority for society and provides a valuable social good. The second two areas more often prioritize humanities “teaching” and seek recognition for the value-added benefits humanistic undergraduate training provides for capital: *Philosophy majors make excellent hedge fund managers! English majors excel at Google!* Tacit in these strategies is a focus on middle-class or elite workers who provide leadership to capital or more specifically the knowledge economy. These arguments come from four year institutions seeking ongoing public support for liberal arts and humanities undergraduate education; the experience or needs of students in two year colleges are not often addressed by four year institutions making this case. These approaches often capitulate to the narrative of economic crisis and assert that the humanities have a unique capacity to revive the failing higher education system by infusing it with humanistic values for a new economy. This approach reproduces historical justifications of the humanities as a human service -- increasing mobility into the middle-class, enculturating people into hegemonic conditions, civilizing people into productive discipline, cultivating civic duty regardless of substantive enfranchisement—but updates the tactics and methods used to “publicize” and persuade high-status publics that these values are still relevant. The world may be in economic crisis, but the humanities and liberal arts are there to resolve that crisis and direct the public toward a more integrated, holistic approach to the “human” in human capital.

An approach that addresses the transformation of higher education, rather than its crisis, shifts the perspective on the role of the humanities in “reviving” an institutional system struggling to overcome its own historical contradictions. Here the humanities and liberal arts are shown to be undergoing similar redistributive processes as the student debt described above. The humanities have historically been key to the distribution of human value through educational hierarchies; the current universities in crisis narrative reveals a transformation in the institutional divisions of value once articulated to liberal arts and humanities degrees (associated with four year institutions). The humanities cannot “resolve” the crisis in higher education by promising a revitalization of (neo)humanisms via digital and new media approaches to culture because its place in the hierarchical system of higher education is changing. Addressing transformations in two and four year colleges and universities requires attention to humanities and liberal arts programs, but not through a return to residual claims about the humanities economic or cultural value. The interface between universities/colleges, humanities and liberal arts degrees, and college in prison programs exemplifies what is at stake in current transformations of higher education in the U.S. College in Prison programs navigate the hierarchical terrain of educational values outlined here, while efforts to provide humanistic learning inside prisons reveals broader problems in how “humanization” and capitalization are distributed and denied. Situating the crisis in the universities in relation to the crisis in prisons allows us to think differently about how best to respond to these transformations.

## Prisons in Crisis

In 2012-2013 a number of high profile media outlets highlighted the conditions in U.S. prisons: sexual assault by guards, overcrowding, racial segregation, inadequate mental health care, unsanitary and dehumanizing facilities. East Mississippi Correctional Facility, ostensibly designated to house people with severe mental health issues, is under investigation for high rates of suicide and self-harm ([http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/opinion/horrendous-abuse-in-mississippi-prisons.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/opinion/horrendous-abuse-in-mississippi-prisons.html?_r=0)). The Bureau of Justice study, *Sexual Victimization in Juvenile Facilities Reported by Youth, 2012*

(<http://www.propublica.org/article/rape-and-other-sexual-violence-prevalent-in-juvenile-justice-system>), surveyed over 8,500 youth in private and public facilities across the United States and identified that over 1,720 had been sexually assaulted, multiple times, by adult staff members. In 2012 and again in 2013 thousands of people in California prisons organized widespread hunger strikes to protest inhumane conditions, including the over use of solitary confinement, and for the right to one telephone call per week and to use wall calendars. While prisons have always incurred a form of crisis for the people caged within facilitating premature death, these reports surfaced in mainstream media outlets and fueled a national discourse surrounding a “prison crisis.”

Yet despite these reports centering inhumane conditions, this is not the evidence circulated in state capitols across the U.S. As coffers shrink, budget-conscious state officials are reconsidering the economic investment in prisons. Starting in 2009, many states tried to decrease prison-related expenses through the expansion of parole and the implementation of early release programs ([http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/us/13penal.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/us/13penal.html?_r=1)). Nationally, wide array of actors are visibly organizing to close prisons, reform repressive drug laws, and implement “alternative sentencing.” A 2012 Sentencing Project Report (<http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/On%20the%20Chopping%20Block%202012.pdf>) on state prison closures highlights the associated cost saving measures: in 2012, “at least six states have closed 20 prison institutions or are contemplating doing so, potentially reducing prison capacity by over 14,100 beds and resulting in an estimated \$337 million in savings.”

Prison closure is not just the agenda of Democratic politicians or the “left loony” activists. The national organization Right on Crime (<http://www.rightoncrime.com/priority-issues/prisons/>), with the tag line “the conservative case for reform: fighting crime, prioritizing victims, and protecting taxpayers,” has emerged as a significant actor promoting a “prison crisis” and advancing criminal justice reform. Advocating for many of the reforms that abolitionists and allies have pushed for, including changes to restrictive drug sentencing attached to the “war on drugs,” *Right on Crime* has made inroads in over two dozen states and counting.

These attempts by *Right on Crime* and related conservative and liberal actors to question or change public policies invariably avoid a rigorous and transparent analysis of the fundamental investments that naturalized the build up of the U.S. prison nation. As persuasively identified and theorized in recent scholarly texts, including Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (2011) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007), the prison nation is intertwined with U.S. commitments to white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy. Prison reform efforts that fail to see how white supremacy for example, is at the core of punishment in the United States will simply permit the reproduction of white supremacy in new mechanisms of punishment, exclusion and state sanctioned capture.

The current “crisis” in prisons is forcing the implementation of alternatives to incarceration, budgetary realignments, and legislative and sentencing reforms. States grapple with decarceration strategies, not because of an ethical recognition of the continuing harm of prisons, rather because prisons and punishment consume budgets. While structures might disappear or be repurposed, the ideological frameworks that required and naturalized these facilities do not disappear. These moments of “crisis” and transition offer opportunities for intervention and resistance to a prison nation, but also provide an opening to anticipate how the state might be preparing new forms of capture. As the debates about prison closure and implementing alternatives to incarceration develop across the U.S., the need to contain and confine superfluous or disposable bodies remains.

The shifts in the prison nation offer opportunities to engage abolition frameworks in new ways. Following W.E.B. DuBois, it is not enough to take down prisons, or to simply reform drug laws; we must name and transform how our democratic institutions continue to shut out millions from the “best of” pathways. An abolition-democracy, to use the term of Angela Davis and W.E.B. DuBois, requires reconstructing the structures *and traditions* that safeguard power and privilege, just as much as taking down those that visibly punish and oppress. Challenging the prison-nation therefore means fighting to close prisons, but it also means doing the perhaps more difficult work of opening up and reconfiguring other institutions that have shut their doors to those who have been abandoned by our punishing democracy. Universities and Colleges are among the institutions whose own viability depend upon the successful abolition not just of prisons, but of the conditions that make prisons and other punitive and carceral models possible. College in prison programs help clarify the interdependence of universities/colleges and prisons during the era of alleged crisis in education and incarceration. These programs emerge in the interstices of educational and carceral institutions, often seeming to promise resolution or escape from crisis models while costing institutions little in the way of economic, political, or cultural capital. But these programs are also poised to clarify and move beyond crisis models to create alternative engagements with the abolition undercommons.

## College in Prisons

The Higher Education Act of 1965 formally brought a federally funded loan-and-work program to postsecondary education, including grant funds for students through the Pell Grant program. Pell grants enabled people across the U.S., including those in prison, to access post secondary education. The prison uprisings throughout the 1970s – from Pontiac to Attica – pushed for greater access to relevant and quality education for people behind bars. These movements linked educational access to broader aims of self-determination, racial justice, and prison abolition and were connected to larger race radical freedom struggles of the period. In the wake of these legislative and activist demands, education programs in prison flourished. By the 1990s, hundreds of college programs awarding degrees were offered in correctional facilities across the country. Community colleges held contracts with many state prisons to offer Associates Degrees and a range of vocational courses. In 1994 the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act restricted access to Pell Grants ([http://realcostofprisons.org/writing/Taylor\\_Pell\\_Grants.pdf](http://realcostofprisons.org/writing/Taylor_Pell_Grants.pdf)) for incarcerated people, severely impacting the ability to offer accredited college programs on the inside that awarded degrees. As a result, roughly 350 college programs in prison closed.

Despite the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act and the loss of PELL grant resources, in the last decade post-secondary programs for people behind bars around the country have begun to rebuild. In particular, more programs are being developed through partnerships between colleges, non-profits, and state Departments of Correction (<http://prisonstudiesproject.org/directory/>). There are no explicit goals shared by college in prison programs. Some programs have explicit political goals: educational access for those living on the inside is a human right, and education programming in prison is one tactic among others seeking redistributive justice. Other programs have more reformist goals: educational access for those living on the inside is a moral or rehabilitative issue, and education programming in prison is one tactic among others seeking moral and social reform of individuals linked to broader aims of greater public safety and reduced recidivism. It is difficult to track the goals and commitments of college in prison programs because all programs must operate according to the rules and expectations of the Department of Corrections. This can often require public relations materials or program rationales that favor aims of public safety, reducing recidivism, and moral uplift over aims of educational equity and social justice, regardless of the actual operating principles of the program on the ground.

Wildly uneven inside and across states, educational programs operate within and actively animate multiple narratives about the aims of either education or training in prisons. These programs have diverse institutional structures, including state-supported Graduate Equivalency Diplomas (GED), English as a Second Language (ESL) curricula and vocational trainings, volunteer offerings in creative writing and reading groups, and degree granting programs affiliated with accredited higher education institutions on the outside (including community colleges and four year universities). College programs in prison operate in the interstices of state, private, and non-profit institutions and are usually justified to foster intellectual expansion and struggle against distributive arguments over basic public education (the right to access elementary, middle, and high school equivalency). Similar to the uneven educational programs available outside prisons, critical and flexible literacies are available within and across all of these models and programs but guaranteed nowhere within any of them. Struggles to provide and ensure general access to high quality adult basic education and the completion of a GED are ongoing across states; approximately 68% of those in state prisons do not have a GED or a high school diploma. Adult basic education and GED preparation are frequently delivered through state contracts with specific community colleges or educational facilities.

The institutional relationships governing college in programs vary widely. Many are projects of specific universities (Boston University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Bard College), some are volunteer programs that developed a University and/or Community College partnership (Cornell University and Princeton University), some are extension sites of a specific University or College (Prison University Project/Patten University and The College Program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility/Marymount Manhattan College), and still others are non-profits partnering with distance learning programs for the incarcerated (University Beyond Bars). Affiliation with a university does not necessarily indicate that these programs can award a degree, or that students enrolled can earn credits from that university or college, or that the people taking credited classes in the prison through a particular university are understood by the university as “students” of that institution, although this is the case with several programs.

While these institutional relationships vary widely, chief distinctions seem to be the amount of control over the assignment and training of teachers, the compensation for teachers and program staff, and the permanence or sustainability of the program. The Department of Corrections (DOC) infrastructure of each program also varies. Despite the economic and political crises facing state prisons, some programs demonstrate evidence of long-term relationship building with the DOC such as offering low or no cost higher education opportunities to Correctional Staff or securing DOC commitment to sustain educational partnerships by permitting access for theater groups, art shows, or multiple volunteer programs. Program funding often follows the pattern of institutional relationships: some programs are funded entirely by their host University (staff, teachers, and tuition), some receive tuition waivers or reductions but must fundraise their own staff salaries, and some operate primarily through volunteers with limited staff or teacher salary needs. Despite declining or stagnate state contributions to higher education and endowments, restrictive enrollment post secondary institutions are becoming increasingly involved in post-secondary programs in prisons. The impetus for this involvement is often generated at the faculty and student level, with reluctant or uneven buy-in from University/college administration.

One of the most pressing issues facing college programs in prison is how to use limited space and funding to enable the maximum number of students to access meaningful course work and to complete degrees. Some programs aim at open access to as many students as possible. Prison University Project, operating out of San Quentin with the partnership of Patten University, offers open access to college readiness curriculum for all post-GED students. They may enroll in Associates of Arts classes once they complete the college readiness curriculum; the sponsoring University provides funding for tuition, teachers work as volunteers, and money

for staff and materials is developed through private grants and individual donors. Other programs offer more restricted access to their degree-granting programs, such as the Boston University Prison Education Program (<http://www.bu.edu/pep/>), which admits students who are prepared to enter a four-year program and who enroll directly as Boston University undergraduates. The University pays for student tuition, staff and teacher salaries, although the teachers are compensated at slightly less than they would earn teaching on the main campus. This program also offers DOC Staff scholarships for courses at BU. While their program has competitive admission, it partners other programs serving the broader prison population (including the Partakers program, a religious organization that provides college readiness training). Programs that do not have free tuition from a partner university—which is most often a private institution—must fundraise tuition from private foundations (one family foundation supports much of this work across the U.S.). Unlike programs in circulation prior to 1994, the majority of these educational programs are unsupported by public money or public institutions.

This is the problem confronted by efforts to create access to post-secondary education in particular: in our era college education is not free. In the context of formal credit-bearing institutions, learning is assigned a specific monetary value. Learning outcomes are secondary to program and institutional outcomes, measured by students enrolled, dollars delivered and transitions after graduation to employment. College credit can be purchased *without* any demonstrable learning taking place, as has been the complaint about some private on-line universities. But college credit cannot be earned through learning alone (without a monetary transaction) except in the rare case of honorary degrees. Course credit by examination, the lowest cost formula, still requires a fee for “testing out” of a course based on learning beyond the classroom. Prison-based programs could forego college credit and focus instead on the value of learning. But many students and participants in these programs feel strongly that college credit is a key value – it appears to promise improved confidence and greater job access post-release as well as a credential whose value transfers across the walls. While college credit does not guarantee improved post-release outcomes, and beliefs in the magical powers of formal higher education are often overstated, there is no doubt that receiving college credit for their learning is important to students on the inside. To meet the needs and expectations of students, programs must find new ways to navigate the interface between prisons and universities.

## Frameworks for Engagement

A commitment to the Abolition Undercommons requires that we shift the frameworks we use to justify and operate higher education programs in prisons. Providing access to higher education for underrepresented populations is not enough. This work must be strategically and conceptually networked into wider justice movements. For those working in relation to educational access in prisons, this means creating programs focused on people rather than prisons, with the acknowledgement that currently 7.2 million people are locked behind bars or under other forms of state surveillance and punishment. Yes, we must engage people currently incarcerated, but educational programs inside prisons must be build within a broader movement designed for the end of prisons and the beginning of a society where higher education is a free public right linked to economic and political self-determination. Following Moten and Harney, we step away from any prescriptive closure yet offer some conceptual tools central for our realignment, with accompanying anxieties. This does not resolve the risks and dangers of institutionalizing higher education within and through prisons, but it does provide some beginning tools to manage and assess the justice outcomes of this work.

A key step is to shift how those working in educational programs in prisons generally define the problem from one of service/access to one of engagement/justice. Framing the problem as service obscures deeper and wider linkages and produces both individuated and structural responses that reproduce the very landscape that naturalizes and legitimates prisons and punishment. Framed as service/access, college in prison programs

implicitly address the joint “crises” in higher education and incarceration: they affirm the value of higher education while offering the state “free” services to help people transition from life inside cages to life on the streets. The illusion that higher education in and of itself can successfully ensure this transition provides cover for the broader structural failures the narrative of “crisis” obscures: that there are fewer and fewer secure jobs, at lower and lower pay; that legal discrimination against people with a prior conviction reduces access to housing, employment, enfranchisement, and social services; that many people release from prison into communities deeply impacted by economic, political, and social devaluation; and that a college degree no longer promises anyone the economic or social security entrance into the middle-class once seemed to guarantee.

Framing the problem as engagement/justice reveals the structural relations between institutions of higher education and incarceration. The development of higher education programs in prison provides an opportunity for university-based actors to shift our diagnosis of recent transformations in both universities/colleges and prisons. Participation in education programs in prison holds the potential to redistribute economic, ethical, and aesthetic values associated with self- and community-determination. Formal education is not the only pathway toward self-determination, and for many it is increasingly the vehicle least capable of supporting this goal, yet it is a powerful and resource-laden economy that we are unwilling and unable, for now, to abandon. The benefits of reconceptualizing the relationality between the University and the Prison is not only the potential redistribution of resources and their affiliated life pathways. Shifting from *access* to *justice* opens up other sites of intervention, builds potential allegiances and creates new nodes of communication. Built into the public college or university through a justice framework, education in prison programs hold the potential to ignite discourses about the very “humanistic values” that produce and naturalize our prison nation. The intimacy between these sites might enable a structural redistribution, through commitment to the abolition undercommons. Not in isolation, as actors crossing prison and campus walls, but as programs with structural linkages to these broader conditions that shape what Moten and Harney call, but don’t unpack, “complex relations.”

The move from access to justice isn’t without risk. At our sites the ongoing obstacles are profound, seemingly intractable: byzantine, mercurial and uncheckable power of the Department of Corrections, pervasively seductive hetero-gendered and racialized volunteerist scripts woven into our economic landscape, recuperative powers of the diversity and public service narratives within post secondary education, and a generalized public amnesia surrounding white supremacy and punishment. Couple these seemingly insurmountable structural problems with our own anxieties about “failure” that accompany any engagement and it seems infinitely safer to remain in the realm of critique and to offer this analysis as a provocation. Yet in this case publishing a critique in *Lateral* could be construed as precisely the kind of “professionalism” under critique here: one that masquerades as political engagement by raising questions in arenas not designed for mapping action, and where the people designated as audiences or interlocutors are not the primary political actors. Equally problematic however is the fantasy of some fully participatory answer, in particular given the motivation of “humanistic love” voiced by some educators working in prisons. The commitment to *passion* or *love*, over and against professionalism, can exacerbate highly gendered affective and cognitive orientations to institutions and affiliated individuals. This can end up reinforcing a hetero-gendered and racialized culture of volunteerism within many programs and mystifying the “complex relations” between professionalism and labor of love. While we do not locate “white ladies bountiful” among the categories of fugitive enlightenment, the role of such delimited feminist counter-modernities must be addressed in any engagement/justice approach to college in prison programs.

To counter Moten and Harney's underspecification about "another relation" and how college in prison exhibits this "other relation" to "another abolition," we argue for more precision to name the actors within these systems and clarify how "professionalism" *and its resisters* play such key roles. Structural relations between the University and the Prison include investment portfolios featuring private prison corporations such as the GEO Group (TIAA-CREF), labor contracts with prison production companies (Correctional Corporation of America), state budgetary lines separating education funding inside and outside prisons, and food service conglomerates, such as Sodexo, that service both colleges and prisons and other corporate entities. But the financial and political realities of the prison/university/philanthropic/nonprofit industrial complex does not adequately characterize how these structural relations create agency for specific human actors. The underspecification of "another relation" makes it difficult to figure out what precisely is at stake in creating and running these programs, and for whom. "White ladies bountiful," therefore, become one key to this unspecified structure, and where the gender/race/sexuality/class spectrum of activism can potentially open and unfold differently in commitment to a fugitive enlightenment. But to do this, we must run the risk of staking our claims, and naming some terms. For us greater specification, and more visibility, is key to moving college in prison programs from the interstices of institutional structure to a leverage point whose operation holds the potential to disrupt business as usual.

To begin the process of specification, we offer four guiding assumptions we use in our own work, then some basic goals for practice. Here are the assumptions:

*Assumption 1)* College programs in prisons do not exemplify a commitment to the abolition undercommons. They do not solve university negligence. These programs are likely to have abolition outcomes, but they themselves are not "abolition" nor is it the opportunity for campus-based laborers to escape to the undercommons from their professionalized existence.

*Assumption 2)* College programs in prisons do not exemplify university negligence. Some critiques point to these programs as if they create the conditions of alienated intellectual labor, professionalization as negligence, and theft of intellectual undercommons for the benefit of the university. These programs run those risks, but they do not create them.

*Assumption 3)* College programs in prison do intersect in crucial and potentially useful ways with broader university distributions of value, including the University division of tenure-line and adjunct faculty labor as service, teaching, and research and the division of these definitions of labor from administrative, custodial, and productive labor that maintains the university. They can play a key role in what counts as "academic" or "intellectual" labor and value within this, how we see student involvement, and the role of incarcerated students and teachers.

*Assumption 4)* College programs in prison do intersect in crucial and potentially useful ways with broader prison distributions of value, including the prison system's division of time to release, visitation rights, and access to volunteer programs. They can play a role in how the DOC values education as volunteer, philanthropic, humanistic, or reformatory.

And here are some goals we like. While partial and framed centering education programs in prisons the core goals are relevant to other teaching and learning sites. While one of us is wary of any work that includes checklists, the other one loves checklists because it gives people something to oppose. In that spirit we offer some beginning goals and cautions we have not necessarily been "successful" in enacting or avoiding but which shape our collaborative engagements:

- Work to develop structurally significant student boards that have real power to evaluate and shape courses. This should not be a naïve or romantic “the student always knows best” but a substantive feedback loop that co-constructs programs.
- Create an ongoing culture of political education around and through the program and the courses offered for all participants, including staff and faculty.
- Keep track of and make visible how dominant and problematic racialized, gendered and (hetero)sexualized patterns of labor are reproduced within the work.
- Work to link struggles for educational access for those inside prisons to wider movements for free, quality, public K-16 education.
- Represent the program inside and outside the host university and/or prison with a narrative that does not center public service but instead the right to access public education.
- Understand how labor conditions and contexts shape all work and learning across Prisons and Universities.
- Consider carefully how relationships with DOC (and Universities) are constructed. The strategies of formal institutionalization and autonomy are not wholly feasible, and structural pathways appear to deliver corresponding and complex traps that constrain abolitionist aims.
- Be prepared to walk away from the work; depersonalize investment, do not “own” the program or the process. Perhaps set a term limit and train replacements; this can help with ongoing organizer and leadership development a commitment to ongoing organizer and leadership development and create checks and balances on unhelpful ego-investment, hero/martyr complexes, and institutionalization into a prison mindset.

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